

The Diplomatic System of the European Union: Evolution, Change and Challenges



The Emerging EU System of Diplomacy: How Fit for Purpose?

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This Policy Paper is the first in a series that will be produced by the Jean Monnet Multilateral Research Network on 'The Diplomatic System of the European Union'. The network is centred on three partner institutions: Loughborough University (UK), Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE) and Maastricht University (NL). It also brings together colleagues from a wide range of academic institutions within the EU, and includes participants from EU institutions and non-governmental organisations. The aim of the Policy Papers series is to contribute to current debates about the emerging EU system of diplomacy and to identify the key challenges to which the EU's diplomatic system will need to respond in the short and medium term.

This Paper reflects discussions at the initial conference of the network, in December 2009, and developments in the wider debates during early 2010.

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Overview: The Problems of An EU System of Diplomacy

The ratification and implementation of the Lisbon Treaty has created the framework for development of a wide-ranging system of EU diplomacy. This system is not being created on an institutional *tabula rasa* – nor is it being created in an international vacuum. A key issue to address is therefore the extent to which the system will be ‘fit for purpose’, in two senses:

- First, will the EU’s system of diplomacy provide the EU with the ‘equipment’ to exercise a coherent diplomatic influence in the world arena?
- Second, will this system enable the EU to meet the key challenges of life within the world arena in the 2010s?

In relation to the first of these questions, it can be observed that the EU’s emergence as a significant diplomatic actor is not sudden or unexpected – it is the result of processes that have taken place over the past four decades, and not unexpectedly, it reflects bargains and compromises made during that extended gestation. It will also reflect further such bargains and compromises among institutions and Member States as the implications of the Lisbon Treaty unfold. Thus this paper assumes that the provision of diplomatic ‘equipment’ for the EU is a political and social process rather than just a mechanical implementation of agreed institutional changes.

In relation to the second question, it is clear that the consolidation of the EU’s diplomatic system will take place in a changing system of world diplomacy, and that one of the key tests of the EU’s new life as a diplomatic actor will be the effectiveness with which it responds to the new constellations and the new challenges and opportunities of international life in the developing 21st century. This paper identifies two central and interrelated challenges for the EU in this context: those of strategic diplomacy and structural diplomacy. Crucially, these ‘external’ challenges intersect with the ‘internal’ process of the development of the EU’s system of diplomacy.

The crux of the argument in the paper is that at present (in March 2010), the debate about the EU’s system of diplomacy is missing key questions in both of the areas identified above. First, it is by-passing the question of ‘fitness for purpose’ in institutional terms, and second, it is neglecting the issues of external ‘fitness for purpose’ arising from the challenges of strategic and structural diplomacy. We hope the paper will help to focus attention on what we see as crucial issues in the development of an EU diplomacy.

The Challenge of Twenty-First Century Diplomacy

As noted above, the EU’s system of diplomacy is not emerging into a historical or international vacuum. A number of significant trends in twenty-first century diplomacy demand consideration in any evaluation of what is happening within the EU:

- First, the *participants in diplomatic processes* have become much more diverse and difficult to manage. The days when diplomacy could be conducted within the confines of a cross-national diplomatic elite have very largely gone. What has taken the place of that elite could be described as a process of *multi-stakeholder diplomacy*, within which a variety of participants with a variety of interests and of characteristic behaviours manoeuvre for influence.

- As a result of this change in patterns of participation, the *roles of national diplomatic services* have increasingly been challenged. States have responded actively to the new situation, and have created new structures with which to manage the increasingly complex environment within which they have to pursue their interests; but the capacity of the state to retain its central if not dominant position (and of specific states to retain their positions) is open to question.
- There has been an increasing focus – both in the study and in the practice of diplomacy – on the growth of *diplomatic networks* and of *structures of global governance*, within which the diverse participants in world politics can communicate with the aim of managing complex global issues. Traditional diplomatic processes of negotiation and the exchange of information can still be identified, but they are implanted in a radically different context. Arguably, this is the case even in the most traditionally sacrosanct domains of international relations, those dealing with security and military affairs.
- Attention thus needs to be paid to the ways in which diplomacy reflects the demand for *management of complexity and difference* within a changing world arena, and the ways in which *learning* occurs within diplomatic contexts and between diplomatic participants. Diplomacy in this sense is seen as a process of deliberation rather than a reflection of ‘power realities’, although those realities are by no means absent – indeed, the danger is that an over-emphasis on the power of deliberation can be overtaken by the impact of events and challenges reflecting the exercise of power or coercion.
- Finally, the *role and identity of the diplomat* has been challenged by the developments outlined above. It can no longer be safely assumed that a diplomat is a member of a national diplomatic service and nothing more. At the most basic level, a member of a diplomatic service can simultaneously be a member of several (or many) diplomatic networks involving a range of institutional frameworks and of ‘diplomatic cultures’. There is thus a strong incentive to think in terms of problems of role definition, role performance and role evaluation when thinking about diplomats – not only in analytical terms, but in terms of the ways in which diplomats do their job on a day to day basis.

For the emerging diplomatic system of the EU, there are many implications of these changes in the form and status of diplomacy in general. On the face of it, the formalisation and consolidation of a system of diplomacy centred on the Union might seem to be a clear and appropriate response to many if not all of the issues we have identified – the ‘hour of Europe’ in terms of diplomacy may have arrived. But that leaves aside the challenges faced by the EU, not only in terms of its institutions but also in terms of the external challenges they might face. We turn first to the challenge of institutions.

The Institutional Challenge

A central concern in the establishment of an EU diplomatic system is the underpinning *institutional architecture*. Institutions structure the interactions between different players and give permanency to the process of dialogue amongst the member states and between the EU and third countries. Institutional bargains and the impact of developments in the wider international arena have for a long time structured the EU’s system of diplomacy in a process of incremental development, reflecting the competition between Brussels-based institutions and Member States for influence, and focusing the search for consistency and coherence in the EU’s developing international roles.

The *Lisbon Treaty* represents the most recent and possibly most daring step in this long process of institutionalisation. In an attempt to address the long-standing lack of continuity, coherence and leadership in European foreign policy, the Treaty has created the new position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR). This double-hatted chair of the Foreign Affairs Council and Vice President of the European Commission will replace the rotating Council Presidency and should fulfil a bridging function with the European Commission. The new European External Action (EEAS) supporting the HR in her daily work will for the first time bring together officials from the European Commission, the Council General Secretariat and the diplomatic services of the member states. For information and implementation on the ground, the Treaty envisages that the HR will be able to rely on the upgraded EU delegations. Last but not least the new President of the European Council will represent the Union in external affairs at the level of the heads of state and government.

Whether Lisbon represents a critical juncture and fulfils the many expectations remains to be seen. The new bodies will not be set up in one day and much will depend on how the different players will eventually resolve the following questions:

- Working out what the creation of the new positions of the non-rotating President of the European Council and the High Representative will mean for the *institutional balance and the nature* of EU foreign policy. Will the nomination of the double-hatted HR open the way for a more supranational approach or will it on the contrary introduce elements of intergovernmentalism in communitarised areas such as trade and development? How will the position of the President of the European Council impact on those of the President of the European Commission and the High Representative?
- The abolition of the rotating Presidency in CFSP was supposed to make it more easy for Europe to *speak with one voice*. The confusion created by the first EU summit in Madrid (February 2010) illustrates that this may not necessarily be the case. Rather than reducing the number of players, the number of phone numbers to be dialled seems further to have increased. For certain heads of state or government it will be extremely hard to accept that during their period at the helm it will be the President of the European Council and the HR who are responsible for the external presentation of the Union.
- An important piece of the new institutional puzzle is the *European External Action Service*. Decisions about its composition and scope of activities, its financing, staff recruitment and the principles of rotation of personnel, will be key factors in the further development of a credible European foreign policy. Emerging evidence in early 2010 seems to indicate that the EEAS is becoming a stake in a political struggle between the Commission and the Council of the EU, with the Parliament also involved, rather than a means of integrating the different 'communities' on which the EU's system of diplomacy has to be based.
- Equally important are the terms in which the debate over the EU's system of diplomacy will be conducted. How will the member states and the EU institutions address the challenges related to the creation of the new bodies? Will they primarily be led by national or institutional considerations of *power and influence* or will they be able to define the new institutions on the basis of relatively objective *criteria* related to quality and efficiency? In other words will the tone be dominated by debates about geographical and institutional balances or by what is needed for an effective foreign policy?

- A further issue is that of *coherence*. How will the new bodies affect the coordination of EU external action? To what extent will the HR and the EEAS manage to coordinate the various instruments ranging across (for example) trade, development, human rights and crisis management? The creation of single geographical and thematic desks in the EEAS is a step in the right direction, but since the Commission will continue to be in charge of the financing and implementation of projects, it will be important to ensure that the old inter-institutional rivalries are not replaced by new ones.
- An important element in the evolution of the institutional context will be its impact on the practice of *national diplomatic services*. Will it lead to a re-allocation of resources from the national to the European level? Will the member states be willing to send their best people to Brussels? Are they willing to invest in a joint training programme aimed at the development of a shared diplomatic culture? How will the national embassies in third countries relate to the Union delegations? What will be the division of tasks?

The responses may differ from country to country. While some of the smaller member states may consider the emerging EU diplomatic service as a chance to reduce costs and alleviate their own over-stretched services, big member states may see it as a competitor and try to keep it as weak as possible. At the same time, the position of the HR in a Union of twenty-seven Member States and at least three Presidencies might become hostage to the interests of specific groups; and there is already evidence that this is what is happening. In all of this, it is easy to forget that the intention behind the creation of an EU system of diplomacy is to enable the EU to respond more effectively to key international challenges. To these we now turn.

The Challenge of Strategic Diplomacy

During the past three decades, but especially since the end of the Cold War, the EU has engaged in a consistent search for strategic partners and strategic partnerships; it has also actively identified strategic issues in which it should develop its role and if possible exercise leadership. Indeed, this area of activity has marked the EU out from many other international actors, including leading states. The Union, it has seemed at times, has a strategy for almost everything, and for almost everyone in the world arena. It might therefore seem natural for the conduct of strategic diplomacy to be at the core of the EU's emerging system of diplomacy. However, on closer examination, a number of questions can be identified, about the nature of the EU's strategic ambitions, about the ways in which they might be served by a consolidated diplomatic machine, and perhaps most importantly about the extent to which the current debate makes any reference to such strategic considerations. These questions include the following:

- First, the extent to which the EU might be considered as a *strategic actor*. Such 'actorness' implies a number of characteristics: the ability consistently to extract resources from Member States; a conscious link between extraction of resources and a 'grand strategy' embodying long term aims; the capacity to develop and sustain a consistent *strategic narrative* embodying a consensus among institutions and Member States; and an ability to *identify, adapt to and influence key changes in the world arena*. Implicitly or explicitly, these considerations have been present in the development of 'European foreign policy' since the 1970s – but to what extent have they been resolved, and in what ways might an EU system of diplomacy like that emerging from the Lisbon Treaty enable the key issues to be pursued and achieved?

- Next, the *underlying rationale of strategic diplomacy*. We can identify (at least) three key rationales for the active development and pursuit of an EU strategic diplomacy. The first is *integrative*: in other words, strategic diplomacy is a means by which the EU pursues its own integration, providing a rationale for EU international activity and contributing to the more effective realisation of that nebulous entity, a 'European identity'. The second is *positional*: here, strategic diplomacy is pursued as a means of positioning the EU in the world arena and of making it an unavoidable interlocutor in the management of key international issues. This function of strategic diplomacy has a key linkage to the legitimacy of the EU's international role(s). The final rationale for strategic diplomacy is *relational*: here, it is a means of managing relationships with key partners or in key issue areas which are of importance to the international life of the Union. In this context, strategic diplomacy can take the form of *containment* of key threats or of *promotion* of key partnerships or institutional affiliations. When these rationales are linked to the emergence of the EU's system of diplomacy, the question yet again arises of 'fitness for purpose'. If these are the reasons why the EU has and does pursue strategic diplomacy, to what extent is the institutional framework and the political context in the EU conducive to their successful pursuit?
- Third, the *content of strategic diplomacy*. The EU's pursuit of strategic diplomacy has taken a number of forms; whilst each of them reflects the underlying rationales outlined above, each of them also has distinctive implications which demand management and at times reconciliation in the conduct of EU activities. A roll-call of areas in which the EU has enunciated and pursued strategic ambitions would include: accession diplomacy; neighbourhood diplomacy; inter-regional diplomacy; and partnership diplomacy, especially towards emerging powers such as the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries. At the global level, we can also identify a number of issues areas in which the EU has pursued strategic diplomacy as defined above: environment, human rights, non-proliferation and others. There are important variations and differences not only between these categories but also within them; and this brings us back to a point made earlier about diplomacy as the management of difference and complexity. From the perspective of this paper, the key question that arises is whether the EU's system of diplomacy will muster the capacity to manage this diverse content and make the appropriate choices of forum and process with which to pursue them.

Where does the debate stand in relation to the ways in which the EU's system of diplomacy might contribute to the enhancement of strategic diplomacy? In our view, the key questions outlined above have hardly been touched upon in the debate so far. The EU continues to have a plethora of strategies but no strategy, and there is no evidence that the debate has focused on the ways in which this might be addressed. The rationales for strategic diplomacy have likewise not been consistently addressed or discussed within the debate so far. As implied above, the integrative, positional and relational aspects of strategic diplomacy require constant attention if they are to be effectively pursued, and the inevitable hiatus caused by the contest for influence in Brussels is not to the advantage of any EU initiatives in these areas. Perhaps the most important of all the EU's strategic partnerships is that with the USA, but the ways in which this has been addressed – and responded to – in early 2010 do not give cause for confidence. The content of the EU's strategic diplomacy remains segmented or fragmented, with the different but interlinked forms of strategic initiative continuing to exist in different boxes and no evidence of a grand design to overcome the consequent problems of coordination and resource allocation.

It might be argued that these 'absences' reflect a temporary situation, and that within months or weeks they will be addressed and dealt with. We believe that they actually reflect underlying problems in the development of EU strategic diplomacy that demand attention, and that there is no excuse for delay. Whilst the debate continues in Brussels, or between

Brussels and national capitals within the Union, the opportunity for the EU to exert significant influence on key strategic developments in the world arena may be disappearing. We thus advocate focused and persistent attention to these issues from the very outset of the EU's new system of diplomacy, but we worry that they may get 'lost' in the noise of cross-national and cross-institutional turf battles.

The Challenge of Structural Diplomacy

In the current discussion on the EU's new diplomacy after Lisbon, there is a tendency to neglect one of the dimensions that in the past 20 years have been at the heart of EU diplomacy: developing long-term relations with other countries and regions and - as part of these relations - promoting values, rules and structures that the EU considers important, such as democracy, rule of law, human rights, good governance, free market economy, etc. We label this diplomacy as 'structural diplomacy', being a process of dialogue and negotiation with third countries and other regions aimed at influencing or shaping in a sustainable way the political, legal, socio-economic, security and other structures in these countries or regions. Such a diplomacy is clearly linked to the aims of strategic diplomacy, but is distinct from it in the ways it aims to 'get under the skin' of target countries or regions.

Successful examples of 'structural diplomacy' are the policies towards the Central and Eastern European countries (leading to their EU membership) and, for the time being, also the current policy towards the Balkan countries. Less successful or still ongoing examples are the European Mediterranean Policy, the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Eastern Partnership, the Cotonou Agreement, beside the many bilateral partnerships and agreements with third countries. The goal to have a structural impact on third countries is also at the heart of the EU's post-conflict and peace-building diplomacy, as exemplified in the EU's policy towards Kosovo or DR Congo.

In our view, there is a major risk that the EU's potential to conduct an effective structural diplomacy may significantly diminish in the coming years, for the following reasons:

- A first reason is paradoxically related to the new institutional setup foreseen by the Lisbon Treaty. The institutional division of labour was quite clear in the pre-Lisbon period. The High Representative for the CFSP, Mr. Solana, was in the first place responsible for what we can call traditional diplomacy. The Commission, and particularly Ms. Ferrero-Waldner as the Commissioner for External Relations, was responsible for the long-term relations and partnerships with third countries and other regions. In the post-Lisbon period, the new High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission, Catherine Ashton, will to a major extent combine both functions. As noted above, it remains to be seen what the precise division of labour within the Commission will look like. However, there is a major risk that Baroness Ashton – as a result of normal time constraints and pressure to focus on the most urgent issues - will mainly focus on traditional diplomatic issues, crises and conflicts, and will neglect the long-term relations and the structural diplomacy that are central to a 'European foreign policy'.
- A second reason is related to the fact that, with the exception of the Balkan countries, the EU's structural diplomacy is now mainly focused on regions outside the immediate European 'neighbourhood' (the former Soviet-area, the Mediterranean, Africa, Asia) where the EU cannot use the leverage bestowed by the possibility of membership. It is thus not possible to rather unilaterally compel these countries to adopt the structures that are promoted by the EU. Moreover, the EU is confronted in these regions with other structural powers that equally try to promote their structures and rules (such as Russia, China and Islamism). This implies that the EU in its

structural diplomacy has to demonstrate more convincingly that the structures which it promotes are indeed in the interest of the partner countries and that they take into account the specific views and contexts of these countries. Finally, as the difference between the political, legal, economic and societal contexts in Europe and in these regions is quite large, the EU faces the need to adapt the promoted structures to the specific national, regional or local contexts within these countries, in order to avoid a complete misfit. In short: an effective and relevant structural diplomacy cannot consider the export of European structures as a kind of standard operating procedure, with these structures being 'passe-partouts' that can be applied everywhere, always and in all circumstances

In light of the arguments made here, we wish to advance *three proposals* for the continuing safeguarding or enhancement of the EU's structural diplomacy. *First*, we propose that in the new EU system of diplomacy a number of Adjunct-Commissioners or Special Representatives – backed up with real competences and budgets, but under the authority of Ms. Ashton – should have the explicit task of taking care of the EU's long-term relations and partnerships with other regions or countries and of the structural diplomacy that is part of it. They should be backed up by units in the EEAS that have as their explicit task not just to 'manage' these relationships, but to prepare and conduct an active structural diplomacy.

Second, we would propose that the EU should only promote structures, values and approaches after considering seriously, firstly, what these structures can mean within the context of the third country or region and, secondly, how they can be adapted to the specific context and distinctive priorities and interests of the partner country. This also implies that the EU has to start considering dialogue as a real two-way process in which dialogue is an essential tool to learn more about the contexts and real priorities of the partner countries.

Our *third* proposal is that the EU has to ensure that the new EEAS will have enough expertise about the other parts of the world. Whereas the current concern seems to be whether the EEAS contains a sufficient number and appropriate balance of staff from the member states, Council secretariat and Commission, the main concern should become whether it contains a sufficient number of top experts on China, Asia, Islamism, the Arab world, etc., as a prerequisite for developing a structural diplomacy that is relevant and effective in a changing international context.

Concluding Recommendations

Our key general recommendation is that the debate on the emerging EU system of diplomacy should lift its eyes from the tactical debates in Brussels or between Brussels and national capitals, and take into account the broader context set out in this paper. In pursuit of that more general recommendation, we make four overall recommendations on the basis of the argument set out here:

- First, that the debate should take more explicitly into account the changing nature both of diplomacy in general and of the more specific diplomatic constellation in the contemporary world arena, and should identify the ways in which an EU diplomacy might meet those challenges.
- Second, that the debate should make a far more explicit link between the contested institutional frameworks and allocations of responsibility and the aims that an EU diplomacy might pursue – many of which are extant but largely ignored in the tactical battles being fought in Brussels.

- Third, that a key consideration in evaluating the capacity of the emerging EU system of diplomacy should be its capacity to undertake, sustain and bring to fruition a coherent EU strategic diplomacy.
- Finally, that the debate should take fully into account the need to build on successes in EU structural diplomacy, and to avoid outcomes that would limit or eliminate the potential for a creative EU structural diplomacy.

We do not see these as issues that can be postponed until after the debate has been concluded – we see them as vital props to a successful EU diplomacy for the future.

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The Diplomatic System of the EU Network, funded by the European Commission's Jean Monnet Project, brings together three partner universities with a strong tradition in the study of European integration in its international context. The lead partner is Loughborough University, and specifically its Department of Politics, History and International Relations and Centre for the Study of International Governance. The other partners are Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, from Belgium, and Maastricht University, from the Netherlands. Each partner is responsible for key events and a research strand. In addition selected experts drawn from EU and Member State institutions and from relevant sections of civil society will be invited to participate in selected network activities.

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